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ABSTRACT

An economic analysis of setting tuition rates for organized camps addresses four topics of general interest: (1) measuring the economic value (revenues and expenses) of a camp; (2) measuring the true costs (fixed holding costs, fixed costs, and variable operating costs) of operation; (3) establishing a demand curve for measuring camp revenue; and (4) setting optimum tuition rates. The first three topics set the stage and establish the vocabulary for discussion of the fourth, which is the theme of this article. The analytical tools introduced here should facilitate decision-making with respect to expansion or contraction of camp operations and general long-range planning. A final observation suggested by this analysis is that it is applicable to the camping industry as a whole. Industry-wide (national or state) cost profiles and demand schedules can theoretically be constructed to suggest optimum operating conditions in terms of tuition and volume. (Author/AH)

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TUITION RATE SETTING FOR ORGANIZED CAMPS:
An Economic Analysis

Robert E. Doucette and Frank M. Levine

An Occasional Paper issued by the Fund for Advancement of Camping

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About the authors

Robert E. Doucette
Economic Analyst

Robert E. Doucette combines an interest in camping and education with a sound background in economics and broad experience working in that field. After obtaining an AB in economics at Merrimack College in North Andover, MA in 1965, he taught in public and private secondary schools and served as head counselor in a private summer camp near Ely, VT. More graduate work in economics and the MBA degree followed in 1973 from the University of Maine, Portland. The State of Maine used his services in the Department of Finance and Administration to forecast tax revenue before he moved to his present position of Senior Associate at Veritas Associates, Inc. of Portland, ME, a consulting firm specializing in management applications of economic analysis. In recent years he has served as the economic specialist to the Center for Research and Advanced Study at the University of Southern Maine in their extensive and continuing research into camping.

Frank M. Levine
Consultant

The name of Frank Levine is already familiar to those who have followed developments in the American Camping Association and the Fund for Advancement of Camping during the 1970s. From his home base in Maine, where he was owner/director of Camp Trebor from 1947 to 1972, his influence has reached across the country because of innovative and significant camping studies and publications.

His landmark publication in 1976, "Children's Summer Camps—Their Economic Value to Maine," was the nation's first statewide study of the value, impact, and potential of organized camping. Subsequently the Maine legislature has taken action helpful to camping and other small businesses; and ACA has recently urged a national study of camping along the same lines. Levine was the designer, organizer, and manager of the original project, which was encouraged by a funding grant from FAC. This 125-page booklet may be obtained from the Center for Research and Advanced Study, University of Southern Maine, Portland.

In 1978, at the request of FAC and totally funded by it, Levine carried out a study which led to the publication of "A Land Tax Alternative Manual for Owners of Organized Camp Properties." Approaches suggested in this manual are helping camp owners in many states cope with their land tax concerns. Copies may be obtained from the Fund for Advancement of Camping at $9.55 each, UPS delivery.

Frank Levine is currently on the staff of the New Enterprises Institute of the Center for Research and Advanced Study at the University of Southern Maine.

TUITION RATE SETTING FOR ORGANIZED CAMPS: An Economic Analysis

Robert E. Doucette and Frank M. Levine

Nobody quite knows what economists do. I suspect that many practitioners of the "dismal science" rather enjoy this aura of mystery, apparently believing that general inscrutability is a necessary—and probably a sufficient—condition of truly professional status. Several years of flirtation with forecasting economic trends, developing economic impact analyses, and discussing the ebb and flow of the latest fashions in taxation and other economic concerns of the commonweal have led me to one rather humbling conclusion: that economics is simply a **logical way of thinking** especially suited to dealing with hard choices about things commonly measured by money. Notwithstanding the truly awesome proportions of the econometric Frankensteins developed by generously endowed think tanks, economics does **not** offer definitive answers to many problems (even of purely economic nature), but only sets the stage for clear thinking by delineating the consequences of different courses of action.

To say this is not to denigrate the value of economic analysis either in general or as applied to any particular problem. Quite to the contrary, though clear thinking is seldom actually in style, it is almost always necessary for the successful management—and even the survival—of most organizations and enterprises. The management of organized camps is hardly exceptional in this respect. Although defensible statistics are lacking for the nation as a whole, it appears likely that the successful operation of many camps is currently being threatened on one side by the inflation of land values and the opportunity costs of withholding land from development, and on the other side by relentlessly rising operating costs, including taxes. Since it is unlikely that these pincers will loosen their grip in the near future, those persons interested in promoting the long-term economic viability of individual camps and the camping industry must seek to optimize operating efficiency.

The analysis which follows addresses four topics of general interest in this regard: 1) Measuring the Economic Value of a Camp; 2) Measuring the True Costs of Operation; 3) Measuring Camp Revenue; and 4) Setting Optimum Tuition Rates. The first three topics set the stage and establish the vocabulary for discussion of the fourth, which is the theme of this article. The analytical tools introduced here should facilitate decision-making with respect to expansion or contraction of camp operations and general long-range planning.

MEASURING THE ECONOMIC VALUE OF A CAMP

An "economic" analysis of any enterprise, whether or not operated for profit, provides perspective on the relationships between those factors which account for the **market value** of the assets held vis-a-vis their value as **income-producing** capital. The latter is measured by the **capitalized value** (defined below) of annual economic earnings and is simply the value of the enterprise as a business run for profit, while the former refers to the value of the assets of the business to a potential buyer (e.g., land developer) without the constraint that these assets be utilized in the operation of the business (e.g., an organized camp).

There are conceptually two components of the economic earnings of a camp: the excess of revenues over expenses and the incremental appreciation of real estate values. The first of these is a measure of the profitability of the camp to a private investor. If the camp is already organized as a sole proprietorship, partnership, or profit-making corporation, part of its economic earnings will be determined by what is left after all expenses have been met, including depreciation of equipment and administrative salaries. Note that administrative salaries are an expense to the camp, not profit. The camp realizes profit only when the administrator has been paid a salary commensurate with what that skill level would command in the job market outside of camping. When administrative services are thus valued, "profits" may well prove to be negative.

In determining the potential profitability of a nonprofit enterprise, it is necessary to adjust both revenue and expenses for any subsidies which the

institution has been receiving and which would not normally be available to a private investor. To establish the true economic earnings of a camp it is always necessary to measure both revenue and expenses at non-subsidized fair market value.

The second part of the economic earnings of a camp consists of the appreciation of land values accruing to the camp owner whether or not the camp is actually in operation. To illustrate, assume that the camp real estate holdings—both land and buildings—could have been sold for $250,000 at the beginning of a given fiscal year, and for $275,000 at the end of that fiscal year. This represents a 10 percent incremental appreciation in real estate value to the amount of $25,000 over the course of the year.

If it is also assumed that (after-tax) profits, measured in accordance with fair market valuation (no subsidies) of all revenue and expenses, if $10,000 for the same year, total economic earnings for that year are calculated to be:

$10,000	monetary earnings
$25,000	real estate appreciation
$35,000	TOTAL ECONOMIC EARNINGS

Knowing this, the business value of the camp may be readily established as the capitalized value of the total economic earnings: the amount of money which, if invested at proportional risk, would provide an annual income yield equal to the total economic earnings. If, for example, the proportional risk interest rate is assumed to be 12 percent, the appropriate capitalized value of the $35,000 annual earnings is given by: $35,000/.12 = $291,667.

Whenever the market value of the camp and all of its assets is greater than the capitalized business value of the enterprise, the camp owner is under economic pressure to sell. As land values rise, the market value of camp real estate rises so that the so-called "opportunity cost" of holding onto the camp (i.e., the money being given up by not selling) appears to be great, and may in fact be great. At the same time, property taxes tend to increase in response to rising land values and recent uniform assessment practices. This tax increase, as well as inflation-spurred increases in other operating costs, reduce profit margins so that the capitalized value of economic earnings decreases. Sooner or later, given the continuation of these trends, market value will exceed the capitalized value of the business. When the gap becomes large enough, the pressure on the owner to sell may become irresistable.

To return to the example considered previously, suppose that the camp as a business lost money. If revenues were just sufficient to meet expenses except that the administrator donated about $5,000 worth of his time each year, the theoretical annual loss would be $5,000. Deducting this $5,000 loss from the $25,000 real estate appreciation, total economic earnings are calculated to be only:

	$25,000	real estate appreciation
less	$ 5,000	business loss
	$20,000	TOTAL ECONOMIC EARNINGS

If this $20,000 is capitalized at the same 12 percent, the investment value of the camp, i.e., capitalized earnings, is: $20,000/.12 = $166,667. Recall that the market value of the camp was assumed to be $250,000 at the beginning of the year. Had it been possible to anticipate the capitalized value of the total economic earnings for the year at the beginning of the camping season, camp operations may have been suspended and the camp sold.

There are two complicating factors which cloud this analysis. The first is the existence of noneconomic motives on the part of the camp owners, whether the camp is a private profit-making enterprise or a nonprofit agency camp. In both cases, the "psychic income" to be derived from worthwhile service to young people may outweigh considerations of opportunity costs. When this occurs, the decision to continue operating as a camp, simply hold the assets without running a camp, or sell to the highest bidder is usually dictated by the need to maintain a reasonable cash flow to meet operating costs.

The second complicating factor is the owner's need for income above and beyond normal compensation for operating a camp. There are times when an owner may no longer be able to forgo taking a profit on his land appreciation. So unless the camp operation is extraordinarily successful, he finds himself unable to afford a continued investment in rising land values regardless of how good the investment may be in the long run.

The analysis to follow treats only the relationship between camp revenue and camp expenses with implications for appropriate rate setting strategy. The owner's need for revenue in excess of fair compensation for administrative services and reasonable profit is not considered.

MEASURING THE TRUE COSTS OF OPERATION

The optimum tuition rate is partially a function of the camp's cost structure. There are three types of costs or expenses to be considered: first, those **fixed holding costs** of the camp and its assets which must be met even if the camp never opens; second, the (relatively) **fixed operating costs** of going into business which do not greatly vary with the number of campers; and third, the **variable operating costs** which are roughly proportional to the number of campers.

Fixed holding costs include: 1) property taxes; 2) depreciation of assets, especially equipment, through the mere passing of time; 3) maintenance and repair expenses for buildings and equipment; 4) foregone interest earnings—less income tax liability—on the money invested in the land, buildings, and equipment; and 5) interest payments for mortgages and other loans. The total amount of these five fixed holding costs should be reduced by the value of real estate appreciation due to inflation. Because of the rapid increase in the market value of prime shorefront and other woodland property, fixed holding costs may be low—or even negative. That is, even if the camp were to remain closed for the season and the fixed holding

costs paid out of the "owner's pocket" as opposed to camp revenues, the owner could conceivably improve his economic condition by simply holding his assets.

Fixed operating costs, as opposed to fixed holding costs, are incurred only when the camp actually opens for business and runs programs. Some of these costs are "fixed" in that their amount is relatively independent of the number of campers served. Typically, fixed operating costs actually do respond—albeit sluggishly and in steps—to increasing numbers of campers. For purposes of this discussion, however, such costs as some insurance, most administrative and office costs, advertising and promotion, and physical plant costs arising from current use can be treated as constant over any given camp's relevant range of number of campers.

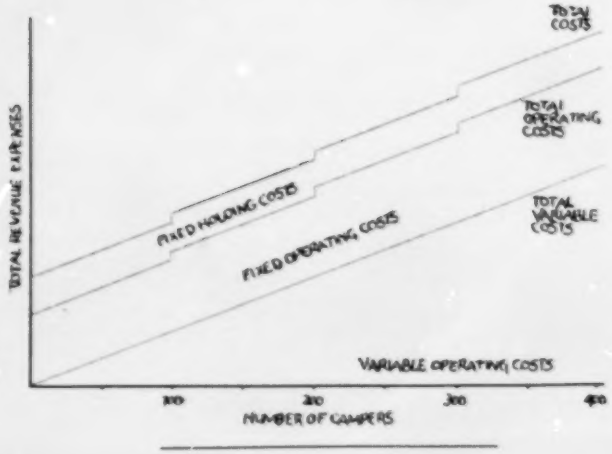
Variable costs of operating a camp are those costs or expenses which increase more or less in proportion to the number of campers served. Included here are: 1) the cost of food, food services, and related kitchen expenses; 2) the purchase, repair, and maintenance of recreational and instructional equipment and supplies; and 3) the wages, salaries, and related expenses of counselors, instructors, and other direct service personnel.

Although fixed operating costs tend to be variable over a broad range of number of campers, and variable operating costs may be stable over a narrow range of number of campers, this somewhat arbitrary dichotomy is useful in representing the cost profile of a camp.

Figure 1, "Prototype of Cost Profile," shows the relationship of costs or expenses (measured on the vertical axis) to number of campers served (measured on the horizontal axis).

Variable operating costs are depicted as rising in direct and continuous proportion to the number of campers served. Fixed operating costs are shown as holding steady over a range of 100 campers, and then rising a notch. The amount of fixed holding costs never changes.

Figure 1
PROTOTYPE OF COST PROFILE



It is important to appreciate, however, that Figure 1 is a simplistic representation of what a real cost profile of a camp would look like if it were constructed to correspond to the actual situation. Almost certainly, variable operating costs would rise progressively less rapidly as the number of campers increased. This is because so-called "economies of scale" would come into play in the form of volume discounts for food and supplies and other operating efficiencies. Also, fixed operating costs would respond to increasing numbers of campers in a thoroughly irregular pattern, rather than in the neat steps shown in the diagram.

As a preliminary step to effective tuition rate setting, a camp should prepare a realistic diagram, or graph, of its cost profile over the relevant range of the number of campers. The relevant range is limited by the physical capacity of the camp as a maximum and by common sense as a minimum. Based upon past records of operation, and allowing for inflation in the future, a useful cost profile for next season's operations can be constructed by analyzing all costs which must be met out of tuition revenues. Subsidized costs and expenses need not be taken into account because the purpose of the exercise is to establish the relationship between tuition and tuition-funded costs and expenses.

MEASURING CAMP REVENUE

The next step in tuition rate setting is to establish the "demand curve" for the camp's services. The analysis of demand proceeds from the assumption that there is a quantifiable relationship between the number of campers who will come to the camp and the amount of tuition charged. To elaborate upon the obvious, it is conceivable that tuition rates could be increased to the point where literally no campers would attend. At the other extreme, charging no tuition, or only a token amount, would result in the camp's being readily filled. Carrying this logic a step further, it is reasonable to believe that slight increases or decreases in tuition would have marginal impacts upon the likely number of campers. For example, a 25 percent decrease in tuition would probably increase the number of applications over what that number would have been with no change in the tuition rate—all other considerations being equal. Similarly, a 25 percent increase would likely eliminate a number of potential applicants.

The specific steps in applying this reasoning to the determination of the camp's demand schedule are as follows:

1. Set the relevant range of the number of potential campers for next season, say from 30 to absolute bulging capacity.
2. In increments of 50 or less (whatever appears most reasonable or convenient), estimate the maximum tuition which could be charged and still be confident of being able to recruit the indicated number of campers.
3. Multiply the tuition rate times each indicated number of campers to obtain the revenue potential for each number.

For example, consider a hypothetical camp which typically enrolls 250 campers a season and charges $700

per camper. Total revenue to the camp is computed simply: $700 x 250 = $175,000. If tuition were increased by $100 per camper, to a total of $800, the camp would probably lose some campers for next season—again all other considerations being equal. If the number of campers fell to 200, total tuition revenue would be: $800 x 200 = $160,000.

If the camp were willing to make do with only 150 campers, tuition might be effectively increased to $900. Similarly, a lowering of tuition rates might attract more campers.

Table 1, "Hypothetical Demand Schedule" lists: a series of possible tuition rates, the corresponding maximum number of campers who might reasonably be expected to attend camp at the indicated rate, and the total revenue for each rate, obtained by multiplying the rate times the number of campers.

Table 1
HYPOTHETICAL DEMAND SCHEDULE

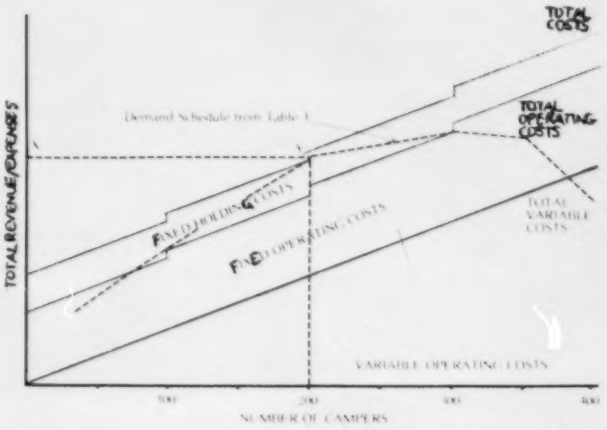
Tuition Rate	Maximum Number of Campers	Total Revenue
$1,100	50	$ 55,000
$1,000	100	$100,000
900	150	$135,000
800	200	$160,000
700	250	$175,000
600	300	$180,000
500	350	$175,000
300	400	$120,000

Note the trend of the total revenue figures: As tuition is decreased from a very high level, total revenue increases to a maximum ($180,000 total revenue at $600 tuition), and then falls off again as tuition is further decreased. Although the numbers presented in the table are probably unrealistic for the majority of camps (as any one set of numbers would be), the pattern is accurate. Total revenue will in fact be a maximum at some point along the range of possible tuition rates, i.e., total revenue will be less if the tuition is either raised or lowered. After going through this exercise for a real camp, the immediate temptation is simply to set tuition at the rate which maximizes revenue. This approach would probably be naive, however, because it fails to take into account the cost profile. As discussed in the following section, it is the relationship between the cost profile and the demand schedule which identifies the most efficient tuition rate.

SETTING OPTIMUM TUITION RATES

The key to the analysis of tuition rate setting is Figure 2, "Relationship Between Costs and Revenue." The cost profile has been duplicated from Figure 1. The curved dotted line is the graph of the Demand Schedule

Figure 2
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COSTS AND REVENUE



from Table 1. The optimum operating size is indicated by the intersection of the Demand Schedule with the line labeled "Total Costs" at point "Y." The "coordinates" of point "Y" are 200 (indicated by the vertical dashed line) and "X" (indicated by the horizontal dashed line). The optimum tuition rate is obtained simply by dividing "X" by 200, i.e., dividing total expected revenue by number of campers. In this case, as shown on Table 1, "X" is really $160,000 (the total revenue associated with 200 campers), so the appropriate tuition rate is: $160,000/200 = $800.

If the Demand Schedule always falls below the Total Costs line, then the optimum operating size is the point at which the demand schedule is closest to the Total Costs line. If, on the other hand, there is a range over which the Demand Schedule rises above the Total Costs line, the optimum operating size is that point within the indicated range where the distance between the Demand Schedule and the Total Costs line is greatest.

It is interesting that the optimum operating size will not necessarily produce the greatest amount of total revenue. More often, the optimum operating size will produce slightly less revenue but will be associated with significantly less cost.

These observations make no pretense to great profundity. As indicated at the beginning of this article, economics is in the final analysis only a rigorous application of common sense. What is indicated by the simplistic graph of Figure 2 is this: Total costs of operation tend to rise at a regular and predictable rate as the number of campers served increases. Associated with each potential number of campers is a revenue yield produced by charging the maximum amount allowed by the market. The optimum operating size, which logically sets the maximum tuition, is simply that size at which total revenue has the most favorable relation to total cost.

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Applying this analysis to a real situation requires a great deal of time and effort. The cost profile, which is only roughly approximated by Figure 1, will reflect a large measure of subjective judgment about inflation effects and costs for hypothetical operating levels during the coming season. Similarly, the demand schedule may be based upon nothing more substantial than a "feel" for the market. Ideally, of course, the demand schedule would reflect the results of an industry-wide market study. This constraint notwithstanding, the analysis outlined here forces the application of a **consistent pattern of reasoning to the rate setting decision**. As in so many other areas of economic activity, important managerial decisions must be rendered with only a modicum of hard facts seasoned by intuition. Yet the decisions must be made, and the elimination of even a small amount of uncertainty or inconsistency ought to be welcome.

The most serious obstacle to the effective analysis of rate setting is the subsidy. Many camp operations are heavily subsidized by sponsoring organizations or by owner/managers who are generally undercompensated (in financial terms) for their managerial services. The way to "handle" the subsidy question is to, however arbitrarily, define operating costs and expenses as those which must be met by tuition, excluding from the analysis those costs and expenses which are expected to be met by subsidy. When the subsidized costs are removed from consideration, the optimum tuition may well be different than that which would have to be charged if there were no subsidies. Also, the optimum tuition rate may depend not only upon the absolute amount of subsidy, but upon which costs—fixed or variable—are subsidized.

A final observation suggested by this analysis is that it is applicable to the camping industry as a whole. Industry-wide (national or state) cost profiles and demand schedules can theoretically be constructed to suggest optimum operating conditions in terms of tuition and volume. Under these optimum conditions, it would be relatively simple to deduce the most efficient relationship between variable costs and the two categories of fixed costs, i.e., the optimum respective proportions of total costs best allocated to variable operating, fixed operating, and fixed holding costs. Even more significantly, it would be just one more logical step in the analysis to identify and justify the most efficient type of subsidy in promoting either increased use of camp resources (measured by number of campers served) or most cost-effective operation.

Reprints of this monograph and others listed below are available from the American Camping Association Publications Service, Bradford Woods, Martinsville, IN 46151. Titles available:

"Uncertain Outposts: the Future of Camping and the Challenge of Its Past" by James A. Mason, $1.00 each.

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"Tuition Rate Setting for Organized Camps: An Economic Analysis" by Robert E. Doucette and Frank M. Levine, $.50 each.

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The Fund for Advancement of Camping is a nonprofit research, development, and education organization that is working for those who believe that people need the refreshment and renewal of outdoor experiences to maintain perspective in an urbanized society. Sponsors and supporters are needed as the Fund implements a new thrust resulting from a two-year development process.

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3. A **system** will be established whereby both the "old" and "new" movements in the outdoor field may be linked for maximum impact on future needs.

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9